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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S SOUTHEAST: A POLITICAL PRIMER

Classified by Consulate Adana Principal Officer W. Scott Reid, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (U) This message is from Consulate Adana.

¶12. (C) Summary: Turkey's southeast encompasses 23 provinces stretching from Gaziantep in the west to Kars in the north and Hakkari in the far southeast. This region includes most of Turkey's Iranian and Syrian borders and its entire Iraqi border. Eastern and southeastern Anatolia's population is predominantly ethnically-Kurdish, with pockets of Turkish (often Turkmen) and Arabic ethnic groups, and totals almost one-fifth of Turkey's 72 million people. Overall Kurdish population figures in Turkey, including large Kurdish populations in western urban areas, are difficult to estimate, but probably number around 15 million. With the informal economy large in the southeast and unemployment prevalent, perhaps one-third of the population is employed, with state salaries, livestock and agriculture accounting for the bulk of the visible economy.

3.(C) Summary, cont'd: The region's politics since the early 1990s have been dominated by a succession of almost indistinguishable Kurdish leftist parties which have succeeded each other as the GoT banned their predecessors - from the HEP to DEP to HADEP to DEHAP. The latest manifestation, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), has a more overtly pro-PKK platform which reflects the polarization of regional politics and hardening of Kurdish attitudes toward Turkish government and Kemalist institutions. Polarization also has decreased patience with the EU's gradual democratic reform program. Bitterness about U.S. designation of the PKK as a terrorist group and the perception that the U.S. has helped Kurds in northern Iraq while ignoring their problems in Turkey has tarnished the U.S. image in the region significantly. End Summary.

Political Scene

¶14. (C) Since the 1980s, the majority of Turkey's Kurds in the east and southeast have voted for leftist Kurdish parties at the local level, entrenching Kurdish ethnic local mayors in daily standoffs with centrally-appointed officials, such as governors and sub-governors, and military (Jandarma and Army) authorities in the region.

Mor Islamist political parties, such as the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), are viable in some areas. These parties often do best among tribal leaders in more pious areas, whose financial alignment with the GOT, based on large land holdings, is longstanding. AKP's municipal toeholds also appear limited to the more established and financially stable regional cities, such as Van, Urfa and Mardin.

Where do the region's Kurds live?

¶15. (SBU) Many of the region's Kurds, following the bloody clashes of the 1980s and 1990s, live in large new squatter suburbs in regional cities; many squalid towns to which they fled after regional fighting; and less-contested rural areas. Data from 2000 data place the region's population at 14.3 million. Population growth rates are largely attributable to births, not internal migration, as in western Turkey. The broad village-based social fabric of the pre-1980s has not returned; continuing migration from the southeast to more westerly Turkish urban centers suggests it may never return.

What do they think about the Turkish government?

¶16. (C) Most Kurds in the southeast feel strongly alienated from the GoT and see little in their daily life to knit them to western Turkey's political structures. To Kurds, the most visible elements of Turkish state structures in their daily life are 1) Interior Ministry-appointed governors enforcing what they see as alien GoT edicts; 2)

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education ministry school personnel who do not speak Kurdish and refuse to acknowledge demands for use of Kurdish in teaching curricula; 3) Turkish National Police almost entirely drawn from Turkish rural areas and seen as government street enforcers; 4) Turkish prosecutors and judges who charge and imprison them for what they regard as free speech and cultural rights issues; and 5) the Turkish military, whom they see as the perpetrators of two decades of bloody regional warfare and human rights abuses, especially the Jandarma's intelligence branch and the approximately 70,000-strong paramilitary "village guard" force staffed with Kurds ostensibly loyal to the government.

What do they want from Ankara?

¶17. (C) Overall, Kurds in the southeast want more local control of their lives and much more of Ankara's resources to attend to basic health, infrastructure and education needs. Many in DTP point to the evolving Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq as an example of what they would like to see in Turkey, describing the goal as "federalism" without really knowing just what Iraqi federalist formulas yet will be. Others in DTP, usually the more experienced former DEHAP cadres, are more circumspect, saying that they want "autonomy and cultural respect" from Ankara. Asked what that would mean, most point to a basket of issues which range from use of Kurdish in public schools to unbridled - and even government-supported - Kurdish language mass media in the region; lowering the national ten percent electoral threshold to facilitate Kurdish representation in Parliament; conversion of the police to a Kurdish ethnic force; and constitutional change to recognize Kurdish heritage on an equal par with Turkish heritage.

¶18. (C) Those in the region's business community with growing trading ties to northern Iraq and real exposure to its evolving political community quietly talk of Iraqi Kurdish widespread corruption, the lack of Kurdistan

Regional Government (KRG) democratic institutions, lack of rule of law, and Barzani cronyism which they say distort the fabric of northern Iraq. Some in this Kurdish ethnic business community also have long standing tribal rivalries with the Barzani clan that color their views. However, Turkish Kurds are generally eager to trade and do contracting, especially with Americans in northern Iraq (if possible), but are reluctant to risk capital there.

¶9. (C) Most importantly - and almost uniformly - many of those with whom we speak underline that they want to see Turkey's territorial integrity maintained. While the region's vast jobless ranks produce hundreds of thousands of migrants a year, there is no population movement from the region toward northern Iraq. It all migrates north and west, first to Diyarbakir; and then to way stations, such as Adana or Mersin; and finally to Istanbul or Izmir, if not western Europe.

What do they think of the PKK?

¶11. (C) Most Kurds in the region feel helplessly trapped between the GoT and the PKK. On the one hand, they perceive an internally divided GoT/Turkish state which they feel cannot resolve its internal policy differences vis-Q-vis the Southeast and therefore relies on a security-only solution. They call this the GoT's "no solutions" policy for the region. On the other hand, only a minority of regional Kurds actually support the PKK by sending their children to its cadres, offering it financial support, subsistence, information and shelter.

¶12. (C) Nevertheless, there is broad and continuing strong sympathy for the PKK as the force which has opposed Turkish government efforts to assimilate Turkey's Kurds into the Turkish Republic's Turkish ethnic core. If forced by increasing Turkish nationalism and spiraling violence into the choice - a distinct possibility following the

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Diyarbakir riots - they will lean toward the PKK.

¶13. (C) Abdullah Ocalan is deeply respected by the vast number of Kurds in southeastern and eastern Anatolia. Most would identify him as their sole legitimate leader. His ongoing incarceration and welfare are central rallying points in the Kurdish regional political dynamic. While many Kurds now reject the PKK's past use of violence in favor of a non-violent political regional solution, they consider it deeply disloyal to disown his - and the PKK's - role in winning them respite from what they see as Turkish government use of state institutions to enforce ethnic assimilation.

How does this translate into DTP's political agenda?

¶14. (C) According to many of our Kurdish contacts who are not politically active, DTP, more so than its predecessors, has started to act politically as the political arm of the PKK. Its founding members - Hatip Dicle, Leyla Zana, Orhan Dogan and Selim Sadak - spent most of the last decade in jail as terrorists, surrounded by PKK cadres. Upon their release in June 2004, they fashioned the new party out of a "democratic grass roots base" whose participants have virtually no experience in politics. DTP stridently calls for a general amnesty for all PKK members; trials of Turkish military members (active duty and retired) for alleged human rights abuses; openly refers to Ocalan using the Turkish honorific title of "honorable" in meetings with us (which we reject explicitly when they use it); calls for his immediate release and unconditional amnesty; and avers that Ocalan is the sole interlocutor to negotiate an agreement with the Turkish government to settle the region's desire for self-government. They criticize the U.S.

designation of the PKK as a terrorist group as wrong and mistaken. They liken themselves to Sinn Fein or the ETA. Some Kurdish contacts note that the difference is that Sinn Fein ran the IRA, whereas the PKK increasingly is setting the agenda for DTP.

Who is Osman Baydemir?

¶15. (C) Osman Baydemir was elected as mayor of Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurdish region, on the DEHAP ticket in 2004. He succeeded a previous DEHAP mayor. As incumbent, he transitioned to DTP when DEHAP was folded into the new Kurdish party. As the incumbent in the representing the largest Kurdish electorate in Turkey, he is an alternative voice on Kurdish issues in a Turkish political system which sees the very existence of such a position as a national security threat. It could, in their eyes, challenge the Kemalist ideology's monopoly of orthodoxy in the Turkish Republic. According to the press, various Turkish officials sometimes question the Kurdish cultural content of Baydemir's speeches, his use of Kurdish in written holiday greetings, or foreign travel. Several times since 2004 they have announced the opening of legal investigations of his conduct, only to cancel those same investigations several weeks later. It is not Baydemir, *per se*, who is the issue, but the Kemalist elite's uneasiness with any alternative power center.

¶16. (C) In meetings with us, Baydemir repeatedly calls for non-violent solutions to the region's problems, more economic development and expresses hope that the GoT will set a positive agenda for developing the region. He is ambitious and hopes to be in parliament some day. His politics seem attuned to a strategy of incremental change and measured, premeditated steps. Like many Kurdish politicians, he also calls on us to realize the "reality of the sway of the PKK over the people" and indicates that the PKK's influence on his grass roots supporters significantly limits positions he can take publicly. At times he seems hesitant to get near PKK "red lines," perhaps fearing for his life. Many Diyarbakir contacts, noting the 2005 killing of Kurdish activist Hikmet Fidan, remind us that the PKK is determined to enforce its monopolization of the Kurdish political space. The PKK frequently carried out

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political killings of Kurdish alternative voices in the 1990's and some in Diyarbakir human rights advocacy circles (to which Baydemir originally belonged) see themselves targeted again now.

How do Islamist-rooted parties figure in Kurdish politics?

¶17. (SBU) Kurdish society fundamentally was conservative and tribal in nature until the violence of the 1980's and 1990's broke the near-stranglehold of traditional tribal structures in the region. Devout Kurds also tend to be from the more conservative and doctrinaire Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. It is among these Kurdish communities that first Refah and now AKP (and to a lesser extent, Saadet party) have established a minority political position.

¶18. (C) While recent press reports of Kurdish AKP deputies lobbying Prime Minister Erdogan on regional issues show that they are not deaf to regional issues, the national party's agenda ultimately holds sway in these communities. The Prime Minister, elected from the southeastern province of Siirt, his wife's birthplace, in a by-election, initially was perceived in the region as a national leader with an ear for the region's woes. This peaked with his August 2005 Diyarbakir speech, acknowledging a Kurdish problem in Turkish politics and calling for further democratic reform. The absence of any follow-through on that statement and his perceived harsh remarks following

the March 2006 Diyarbakir street unrest have, for now, greatly reduced his appeal among regional AKP loyalists.

Other than Islamist-aligned Kurds, are there alternative voices among Kurds?

¶19. (C) Are there alternate voices among Kurds? Yes - and, sadly, no. Small fringe Kurdish political groups exist, furthered by a tiny circle of Kurdish intellectuals, both in the region and western Turkey. Examples are Abdul Melik Firat's (grandson of Shaik Said who led the great 1925 Kurdish rebellion against the fledgling Turkish Republic) Hak-Par party and several even smaller fringe groups. They influence the equally tiny, yet emerging, Kurdish civil society movement in the region, and are ardent advocates of non-violence and the rule of law. Still, their end goals of a new constitution and Kurdish independence from Turkey in all but name through a widely-revised constitution are unlikely to attract widespread Kurdish support, reach mainstream Turkish audiences or moderate Ankara's opinions about Kurdish civil society development.

¶20. (C) There also are notable individuals, such as Serafettin Elci, a former 1970's DSP (Ecevit's nominally center-left party) figure removed from an Ecevit cabinet because of his announcement of his Kurdish lineage, who was subsequently jailed. He lacks a party vehicle, but occasionally writes on behalf of Kurdish issues in op-ed pieces. He maintains close ties to the Barzani clan in northern Iraq as well. Another is European resident Kemal Burkay, leader of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, an advocate of non-violence and expanded pluralism in Turkish politics as a means to address the problems of the Southeast. He appears on (Iraqi) Kurdistan TV from time to time and probably would be subject to arrest in Turkey owing to 1960's-era previously publicized arrest warrants.

How does the region see recent Turkish democratic reforms?

¶21. (C) While the small civil society in Diyarbakir and legal circles see potential hope in the EU-membership driven democratization process, most Kurds, - and explicitly, DTP - increasingly discount these reforms as token in nature. They also resent the begrudging way in which GoT institutions delayed the reforms' implementation. They point to the considerable regulatory baggage attached to the operation of Kurdish language

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schools which made them cost-prohibitive in a poor society. None of these schools now operate two years after they were first allowed to open. They also note that the recent RTUK (central broadcast authority's) belated decisions to allow "mother tongue" broadcasting in Diyarbakir and Sanliurfa came so laden with expensive administrative requirements that they see little viable future for that medium of cultural expression within legal boundaries. Some Kurds even go so far as to point out that they feel insulted by the dated and obviously GoT-slanted Kurdish-language programs broadcast several hours a week on state TRT broadcast. One contact sardonically quipped that the GoT soon would start broadcasting the history of Ataturk in Kurdish dialects to nominally meet the requirements set out in the "mother tongue" broadcast regulations.

¶22. (C) They also see recent judicial reform as meaningless. The EU-desired dissolution of State Security Courts was rendered pointless in their view by their immediate reconfiguration as Heavy Penal Courts with matching jurisdiction, personnel, and discretionary powers. They also find little in the way of increased

civil liberties in the recently revised penal code and point to draft versions of the new anti-terror law, currently before Parliament, as throwbacks to the 1990's.

Then how does the region see the EU?

¶23. (C) While the EU's reputation was fairly positive in 2003-2004, Kurds in the region who hoped that the EU would play hardball with the GoT to advance Kurdish cultural rights have been sorely disappointed. Kurdish perceptions of the EU took further knocks as the EU declared the PKK a terrorist organization; the EU did not strongly criticize the GoT for its summer 2005 regional military campaigns; and EU Ambassadors were seen as leaning on Diyarbakir mayor Baydemir to distance himself publicly from the PKK. The DTP then pronounced the EU soft on their agenda to see Ocalan unconditionally released and granted full amnesty.

How does the region see the U.S.?

¶24. (C) Kurdish regional attitudes toward the U.S are conflicted, but developing an ever more sour tone. Many Kurds strongly criticize the U.S. of using a "double standard" in "freeing southern Kurdistan (aka northern Iraq)," while doing nothing to see that "northern Kurdistan [Southeast Turkey]" enjoys more autonomy. Many bitterly condemn the U.S. designation of the PKK as a terrorist group. Most see BMENA as discredited since they see it as silent on the desires of Southeast Kurds. Others say that BMENA is a sham to cover U.S. designs on the region's natural resources.

¶25. (SBU) Still, many admire the U.S. democratic system, seek opportunities to study at U.S. educational institutions, and most desire its potential free market financial rewards. In general, they do not reject American mass culture, even though they may take issue with certain American cultural developments, often based on their religious beliefs.

What are further developments to watch?

¶26. (C) Further issues to watch are whether and how the GoT may continue its seemingly stalled democratization drive. It will also be interesting to see how Kurds react to the 2007 election cycle's politics and whether they feel the formal election campaign has given them a voice in national politics. The question of whether DTP, either as a party or through running independent candidates as proxies, is allowed to seat MPs in Parliament, could also be important. It also remains to be seen how the region will react to the rising tide of nationalism which could polarize the region so much that the PKK's use of violence could begin to regain legitimacy. Finally, a potentially

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volatile longer-term development could be efforts by the region's Kurds to involve Iraqi Kurds in Turkish domestic politics.

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